

The Development of a Video Art Facility
by Electronic Body Arts, Inc.

This document recounts the history of the Pantomation video studio designed, built and maintained by Electronic Body Arts Inc (EBA) of Albany, N.Y.

EBA was chartered as a not-for-profit cultural and educational institution in 1973. Its founders came from the fields of dance, theater, music and electronic arts. The inclusion of the word "electronic" in the organization's name has been a source of both pride and anguish for its members. Founders George Kindler and Phil Edelstein insisted on the name, because such arts as lighting, audio synthesis and video are integral to the EBA repertoire. EBA proved to be strong in these areas, and the name is appropriate for the group. On the other hand, conservative sponsors of arts organizations have expressed reservations about the word "electronic", and it has cost EBA endorsements and financial support. Periodically the organization debated changing its name, but EBA's designation became synonymous with its aspirations during the development of its computer based video studio, the Pantograph.

EBA has always held a special interest in video. The dance company has appeared locally on broadcast and cable television. Maude Baum and George Kindler studied video for dance at the University at Albany under a grant from its Research Foundation. Tom DeWitt, Vibeke Sorensen and Phil Edelstein are accomplished video artists. Media Director, George Kindler, is a design engineer who has built sophisticated electronics for art applications.

The Pantograph was conceived by Phil Edelstein and Tom DeWitt in 1975. Tom was a fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts studying electronics, and Phil was working as an electronics specialist for the SUNYA Music Department. Their first experiment was a score reader for composers. A television camera scanned a hand drawn graph, and the information was read into a minicomputer where it was stored as a short list of numbers containing the co-ordinates of the graph. During the year, Tom and Phil had residencies at the WNET TV Laboratory in New York City. Both brought EBA dancers and artists into the WNET Studio 46, Tom emphasizing mime and Phil exploring modern dance. Their experiences pointed to the need for video equipment which could track body movement automatically to correlate camera recorded and synthesized spaces. Phil's residency resulted in his involvement with the TV Laboratory's computer project, an abortive effort to control a large video switcher with a PDP 8 computer. By the conclusion of his residency, Phil was very familiar with the computer and its difficulties.

In 1975 Tom DeWitt proposed to the New York State Council on the Arts Video Bureau that some of the Council funding granted to Albany area PBS station WMHT be devoted to developing a video synthesis studio. As a result \$10,000 of \$25,000 granted to WMHT that year was earmarked for purchase of an EAB VideoLab and a Rutt/Etra synthesizer. DeWitt then prepared a proposal, based on his NEA funded research, to construct a unique synthesizer. NYSCA granted a supplementary \$10,000 to WMHT to meet the cost of hardware for this project. When WMHT failed to find funding to pay for the labor of construction, the Council grant was redefined, so that, \$6000

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of the supplementary grant was allowed for labor and the aim of the project was to design and build a computer controlled tracking chroma key system dubbed the Electronic Pantograph. EBA was contracted by WMHT to realize the project by September 1, 1977.

Construction of the Pantomation system began in November 1976. The idle computer from WNET was brought to Albany where Phil Edelstein repaired some of its broken parts. An experimental interface was designed and constructed by Edelstein, Kindler and Richard Lainhart. The computer was returned to New York City in December and first demonstrated at Studio 46 of WNET on New Year's Eve. When the demonstration was evaluated a success, the Arts Council, which owned the computer, reassigned it to WMHT. For the following eight months EBA personnel tested, evaluated, redesigned and reconstructed the system. A prototype was used to control lighting for EBA's production, "Horn", in April under direction from George Kindler. A version of the system was used to create scenes for Tom DeWitt's film, "Outta Space" in June. In August Roger Meyers, a composer and computer programmer joined the project to replace Phil Edelstein who had been hired away by Digital Equipment Corporation. On September 14 the Pantograph was demonstrated in public for the first time at a concert at the University at Albany Performing Arts Center. Included on the program were a Pantomated dance by EBA dancer, Heather Harris, and a musical performance by bassist, Bill Corzett.

In July 1977 WMHT had informed NYSCA that it would abandon its Arts Council funded programs. As a result, the video equipment upon which the Pantomation studio depended was reassigned to other locations in the state. The specialized synthesis equipment, the EBA constructed equipment and some broken equipment were reassigned by NYSCA to EBA's administration. A proposal from EBA to the Council to take WMHT's role was disallowed as EBA is not a PBS station. EBA found itself without the basic video equipment needed to operate the Pantomation studio, and the project was stalled for eight months. Fortunately, among the audience at the September 14 concert was an influential student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute who recognized the level of accomplishment EBA had attained. He brought other students together, and they opened a control room at WRPI to house both the Pantograph and their fledgling television production installation.

In April 1978, Tom DeWitt was granted \$12,000 from the Guggenheim Foundation to continue development of the Pantograph and \$6000 from the National Endowment for the Arts to demonstrate the Pantograph to other artists. Tom contracted EBA to assist in the fulfillment of the NEA grant and donated \$1000 from the Guggenheim to help meet other expenses. For the past year the Media Company of EBA has worked almost daily on developing the video studio. They have hosted noted artists in video, film, music and mime. The facility has been publicized in the local press and television. This month the first commissioned tape produced at the facility was completed for exhibition on April 28. EBA is in the process of seeking additional funding from private foundations, and has an invitation to exhibit its work on the Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Concourse should such work be funded.